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Russian is and will probably continue to be an intruder in the secondary-school curriculum. Like all intruders, it will gain and retain ground slowly and with difficulty and will tend to lose ground quickly and easily. It will be difficult for a high school Russian program to continue to attract and hold the enrollment needed to justify its existence if it continues to be geared more or less exclusively to the high-ability student, and if its chief concern is to prepare students for the university Russian program. Instruction in the Russian language can be maintained successfully in the curriculum only with the tireless effort of the instructor as well as the profession to provide a program with compatibility and relevancy to contemporary teenage reality through the discovery of efficient and economic procedures and the adoption of timely methods of instruction. (Author/AF)

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# SOME OPINIONS ON THE FUTURE OF HIGH SCHOOL RUSSIAN PROGRAMS

An Address to the Spring, 1967, Meeting of the Arizona Chapter of the Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages, April 15, 1967, by John F. Bockman, Coordinator of Foreign Language Instruction, Tucson Public Schools, Tucson.

The curriculum coordinating position which I hold for foreign language instruction was created in the fabric of the Tucson Public School system partly, at least, as a balance to the deliberately cultivated autonomy of each individual school. Any given school in our district reflects the personality and the particularized educational philosophy of its own principal, his staff, and their mutual interaction. This is productive of many strengths. It is also productive of some weaknesses. There is great need for communication and interchange of ideas among schools, and the particular task of a coordinator is to work in the area of communications and idea-exchange, binding schools together for the improvement of instruction and opportunity for students within his particular curricular area.

In this capacity, therefore, I would like to speak to you today concerning the future of Russian language instruction on the high school level as I see it from considerable experience in the field and from the broader perspective of administrative viewpoint, which I think I have become acquainted with over the past few years. I hope that some of my ideas are worthy of consideration, because in general I am rather pessimistic about the future of strong, flourishing Russian programs on the secondary level.

I think most of you are acquainted with my recent experience as a teacher of Russian here in Tucson. Few may know, however, that my hopes for Russian language instruction in American schools go back to 1950, when I exercised what has since seemed to have been an incredible act of foresight and began studying Russian on my own. As assistant professor of German in a small military college, I had been told that I might teach Russian as soon as I had become reasonably well prepared. I did a rush job through the University of California Russian correspondence courses, and actually began to teach Russian in 1952, both at New Mexico Military Institute and at Walker Air Force Base, with qualifications which, of course, would not be considered at all adequate today. I continued to teach Russian there until 1956. In 1957, I conducted what must have been the first experimental eighth grade Russian class in Hempstead, New York. Then I taught high school Russian in a small community in New Mexico from 1958 through 1961. In other words, with one year's interruption, I taught Russian from 1952 through 1961 in a variety of places and under a great variety of conditions. My only resources really were Bondar, Forbes, the Patrick readers, and the army language records.

I mention this, only to stress that I have been at this business for a rather long time, and that I have watched Russian language instruction in this country grow from almost absolutely nothing to almost absolutely something!

Without belaboring you with details, during the 1962-63 academic year, the summer of 1962, and the summer of 1965, I had opportunities to associate closely with high school teachers of Russian from all over the United States, have compared notes with them, and have thus, and through my own experiences in Tucson, formed some opinions as to what may lie ahead for high school Russian.

My principal opinion is that Russian is, and will continue to be, an intruder in the secondary curriculum. Like all intruders, it can and will maintain its position only with great difficulty. I do not believe it can successfully do so in the curriculum of a given school without tireless, perhaps even excessively demanding effort on the part of the instructor. Having personally attempted to do this, I do not know if this can reasonably be expected of any man or woman. I'm sure, however, that the effort is vital.

In support of the first part of this opinion, I think it essential to recall to your mind the remarkable conditions which had to exist before Russian could be introduced on any large scale. (1) The Soviet Union had to launch Sputnik, dealing an embarrassing blow to American pride and self-confidence, the latter already badly eroded by McCarthyism. (2) The National Defense Education Act of 1958 had to formalize political response and crystalize public opinion in support of the reformation of methods and goals in the teaching of foreign languages. (3) Simultaneously, Dr. James B. Conant, in his work, THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL TODAY, had to express recommendations for the improvement of American secondary education which would harden into many of the present policies of school boards and school administrations, amony them that a great many high school students should pursue a long sequence of foreign language study. (4) Overall American embarrassment and dissatisfaction had to lead to prolonged and painful self-criticism, the rise of a fearful Far Right, and an exaggeratedly favorable appraisal of Soviet scientific and educational achievement. The Soviet Union, furthermore, had to stage a series of space spectaculars over a period of years in apparent confirmation of Soviet scientific superiority and wide-spread American educational incompetence.

This fantastic series of events furnished the accepted rationale for the introduction of Russian in a great variety of secondary schools where it attracted a small, but strong group of highly motivated students who apparently believed they were doing something significant for themselves and for their society.

In my opinion, the intervening decade of reaction to the launching of Sputnik has disabused all but a small minority of Americans of their illusions concerning either the superiority or the unrelieved maliciousness of the Soviet Union. I think it would be a serious error in judgment for any teacher of Russian to try to capitalize on either of these illusions. It seems doubtful to me that any single act of the Soviet Union could ever again set off the chain reaction which began in 1957. Much of the rationale for the teaching of Russian has frankly melted away over the past few years, and students are now enrolling for reasons which may have surprisingly little to do with the motives and goals of instructors who prepared themselves, often at heroic sacrifice, to meet the critical needs of our time in history. One student enrolls simply because his sister took Russian before him; another simply because he wants to be different from his sister who studied Spanish; a third simply because he likes the teacher of Russian; a fourth simply because his counselor suggested Russian as a fitting linguistic companion to science; a fifth simply because his parents would rather he weren't studying Russian; etc.

The Russian language program in a given school, therefore, has had to fall back entirely upon whatever inner strength it has been able to develop there in relation to the strengths of the other three, four, or five language programs that exist in the school.

In a recent study, I seemed to find that enrollment in the various languages in one building is set in a certain ratio one language to another, with the ratio shifting gradually, if at all, from year to year. I don't pretend to be able to isolate all the factors which enter into the ratio, but I have a strong impression that the teachers are among the most decisive factors in the ratio balance and in the shifts that take place over the years. I would tend, therefore, to consider the teachers to be the greatest source of strength which a language has in a given school.

The teachers' role in the strength of any language program would seem to me to hinge upon his capacity for making the instruction in the language compatible with the realities of student potential for studying the language and relevant to the teen-age society in which study of the language attempts to find a place. In my opinion, therefore, a successful secondary language program must be compatible with the reality of the potential and all modifying factors, and relevant to the actual student society, not the imaginary, not the wished-for, certainly not the Soviet, etc.

Beyond all other languages, as everyone knows, instruction in Spanish has succeeded in conforming to reality and relevancy, although I would still say, not satisfactorily enough. I wonder, though, how many of us realize that the widespread study of Spanish throughout the United States followed American entry into World War I, and was launched by desperate teachers of German, theretofore the most popular foreign language in America. These desperate German teachers had to retool in a hurry and start teaching Spanish, often, no doubt, with the simple objective of keeping their bodies and souls together. How many of these frantic individuals had time and opportunity to master the niceties of Spanish stylistics and the profundities of Spanish literature. That, undoubtedly, had to await the emergence of a "better trained" generation of teachers of Spanish. The main concern of the re-tooled teachers was not the academics of the matter at all, but the need to sell themselves and their wares on a hostile market. They advertised their wares as both easy and eminently practical--in other words, as absolutely relevant to the immediate, here-and-now needs of teen-age society.

In my opinion, Russian language instruction in America no longer enjoys a significant prestige value or fad value in schools where it has been established for some years -- a prestige or fad value that would lend it pseudo-compatibility and pseudo-relevance. Russian has not proved readily compatible with the objectives of most students, and has not proved readily relevant to the here-and-now of teen-age society. Whether it can under certain conditions, or whether it can't under any conditions, is a moot question.

Regardless of that, it is my conviction that the teacher of Russian has the gigantic job, perhaps in some places the impossible job, of providing Russian language instruction in his school with both compatibility to reality and relevance to contemporary teen-age society. It seems to me, therefore, that he must be, above and beyond the call of duty: dynamic, sympathetic, understanding of individual learning problems, willing to assume significant extra-curricular duties relevant to his field, willing to spend himself, willing to cooperate with counselors and administrators in the delicate job of public relations and image-shaping. He must be able and willing to be this kind of teacher, or the Russian language program in a given school is in very real danger of withering away and dying. As I said before, I am not certain whether any one person can sustain the necessary effort, over the years, and whether it is ultimately worth it, is another question that the Russian-teaching profession will have to decide.

To summarize this opinion, I contend that Russian is and will probably continue to be an intruder in the secondary-school curriculum. Like all intruders, Russian instruction will gain and retain ground slowly and with difficulty. It will tend to lose ground quickly and easily. I believe, furthermore, that instruction in the Russian language can be successfully maintained in the curriculum of a given school only with the tireless effort of the instructor--effort to provide Russian language instruction with compatibility to teenage reality and relevancy to contemporary, here-and-now teenage society.

As a second opinion, I wish to state that Russian language instruction on the secondary level can no longer attract and hold students in numbers sufficient to justify its continuance if there is primary stress upon, or over-riding concern over, preparation of students for the University of Arizona or any other college Russian language program. I hope this is not misconstrued to mean that high school students should not be prepared for advanced standing in college. If they can be, they obviously should be. The point is, though, that over-stress and over-concern with respect to college preparatory aspects of the secondary program is almost certain to tempt the teacher to ignore certain realities as they pertain to the readiness, the temperament, and the goals of the majority of high school students, and it is almost certain to tempt the teacher to establish learning conditions which are more or less completely irrelevant to actual, contemporary high-school-age society. Let me stress that a rare master teacher might well do this, because I think the right individual could make Sanskrit a fascinating and perfectly relevant high-school subject, but I do not expect this to happen in Sanskrit, or in Russian, in Tucson, now, and in the foreseeable future.

This could tear us apart, but it needn't. A close inspection of reality is called for. Almost exactly 50% of University of Arizona Spanish 1a and 1b students have had two or more years of high-school Spanish. At first blush, one might conclude that they had been inadequately prepared in high school, but it appears that this is not necessarily so. The consensus appears to be that a majority of them are repeating because they possess excess high school credits for admission, may write off their foreign language credits, and may lighten their new, more demanding university study load by repeating elementary foreign language for university credit.

Not only is this a pedagogically unsound situation, as far as I am concerned, but it renders absolutely ludicrous whatever anxiety high school teachers have been feeling about this matter.

Of course, let us admit frankly that there <u>are</u> students who are ill-prepared by University or any other standards. There may be any number of reasons for this, not excluding teacher incompetence. One <u>notable</u> reason, however, and one over which we have no control, because it is part and parcel of our real situation, is the difference that exists between your psychology of learning and our psychology of learning.

The psychology of learning espoused by the majority of high school foreign language teachers stresses that foreign language instruction should be based on the development of skills, i.e., the formation of habits, rather than on the solving of problems. There is greater emphasis, therefore, on language as behavior than on language as knowledge. Our teaching materials provide models to be imitated for both spoken and written language. They observe the principle of small increment in which problems are isolated and drilled one at a time before two or more related but contrasting structures are drilled in a single exercise. They also provide for repetition and reintroduction in a carefully controlled manner of material previously learned. A student emerging from the secondary program will not have acquired knowledge the same way your students have, and therefore, will not be able to prove it the same your students do. But to claim that our students have no knowledge at all is to be very misunderstanding of our means and objectives.

Secondary foreign language materials in current use have been developed with both teen-age American realism and teenage American relevance clearly in mind. They have been developed upon a psychology of learning which fits our time, our condition, and our actual high-school population. We think they do the job that <u>can</u> be done, first of all, and the job which <u>must</u> be done, in the second place. You can take our good students to any point you want, providing you will give them an opportunity and the encouragement to make the adjustment to new involvement, new condition, and new competitive population on the university level.

Aside from these, many high school students, whether through over-achievement, agreeability, or whatever, do a perfectly acceptable day-by-day job in comparison with their peers. We recognize and admit their limitations, their inadequacies, their inability to make the adjustment to different conditions which apply in college. Such students abound in great numbers in our high schools, and they are as welcome in our Russian classes as they are anywhere else in the curriculum. Some teachers, unfortunately, are more or less out of tune with the basic philosophy of American secondary education. If they don't actually believe it, many teachers act as though foreign language instruction exists not for the heterogeneous masses, but for the high-ability elite.

In summary of my second opinion, I repeat that conditions being what they are, it will be difficult for a high school Russian program to attract and hold the enrollment needed to justify its continued existence if it is geared more or less exclusively to the high-ability, college-bound student, and if its chief concern is to prepare students for the university Russian program.

Several times I have made reference to realism and relevance as decisive factors in the success or failure of high school Russian programs. These, I believe, must be better understood than they may be, and therefore, I should like to explore in some depth what I have in mind by these terms.

First of all, it must be acknowledged that high school Russian where it exists is in a highly competitive market. It may be competing with three, four, or five other foreign languages for the same students. Naturally, French, German, Hebrew, Latin, Spanish, and now Chinese would all like to enlist the top students, taking them away, as it were, from Russian. The truth of the matter is that there are pitifully few of what foreign language teachers like to call "good students" signed up in any one language.

We have been administering a language aptitude test to sixth-graders throughout Tucson. The first objective of the project was to try to find out what the potential is for a strong Spanish program in two far east-side junior high schools which do not now have Spanish programs. The instrument used is the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery, published in 1966. It purports to predict probable performance in seventh grade foreign language study as indicated by discrete aptitudes, broadly divided into verbal and auditory. Verbal aptitude is defined as the ability to handle successfully the mechanics of language, vocabulary, structure, etc. Auditory aptitude is defined as the ability to assimilate and process information through hearing.

If results obtained thus far are valid and indicative, it would seem that only 4.6% of the tested east-side youngsters going to grade seven will place in stanines 7, 8, and 9 in verbal aptitude, whereas 27% of the same students will place in stanines 7, 8, and 9 in auditory aptitude. It would seem, therefore, that relatively few students will be successful if the language is taught with heavy emphasis on vocabulary learning, analysis of language, grammar, etc., whereas considerably more will be successful if vocabulary, structure, etc., are presented audio-lingually.

While it is always risky business to apply this information to individuals, we are certainly justified in applying it to groups and in drawing conclusions conderning groups. The reality of the situation would seem to be that enrollment in high school Russian, in a very competitive market, is inevitably heterogeneous, with a relatively small percentage of students capable of handling the mechanics of the Russian language, or of any other language, for that matter.

The suspicion that this is indeed true, seems confirmed when we discover that while about 35% of our high school students are pursuing foreign language study, only 4.29% are taking the third and the fourth year of all languages. Is it pure coincidence that 4.6% of our students may rate high in verbal aptitude and 4.29% are enrolled in third and fourth-year language courses? Or is this something to be expected, given the way these courses are taught?

It might be well at this point to remind ourselves that in the 1930's and 1940's, the American public kept delivering an ever more resounding vote-of-no-confidence in foreign language study. The trend all but eliminated foreign languages from the high school curriculum. The reason that is widely accepted for this is that foreign language goals had become identified with those of a discredited classical humanism.

In the 1950's, the national trend was reversed. American experience in World War II reconfirmed basic values in foreign language study, but the humanistic base of that study in schools, formal grammar and heavy literature, were not among them. The government and "Berlitz" nurtured the trend; the schools profited by the renewed interest as enrollment began to rise. The school's response, however, was predictable inadequate.

In the 1960's, the country decided to intervene not only in the stimulus for more significant language study, but also in the response. "If we don't have the kind of foreign language programs we need, let's write them. If we don't have the kind of foreign language teachers we want, let's train them." -- This to me is substantially the significance of the National Defense Education Act as it affects secondary foreign language teaching, and it does not seem particularly wise and foresighted, to ignore, and to continue to ignore the implications of this decisive expression of American public opinion.

The country and American public opinion plainly seems to have been asking foreign language teachers to reform: to change their outlook, modify their methodologies, get off their "academics" and move forward with the needs of the nation.

The country plainly seems to have been asking foreign language teachers to consider giving the vast majority of American children and teenagers a chance to study foreign languages for as long as it is profitable for the individual to do so, to forego reading and writing for a while, to establish good habits of speaking and listening. It seems to me that the country at one time recently wanted foreign languages for children the way it wants music, physical education, art.

Factors of realism as they apply to secondary foreign language teaching are not difficult to discover and dwell upon. Factors of relevance are. Most of what is done in a foreign language classroom is more or less irrelevant to the typical teenager. Involvement, mood, atmosphere, identification, excitement, and anticipation are not, and the way things are done can lend them relevance. It is the mark of a master teacher, I think, that he is capable of making dull subject matter and routine manipulations terribly exciting. His students look forward to spending an hour a day with him as totally different individuals from their other selves who yawn, scratch, and sleep their way through one period after another. Relevance, I am quite certain, does not occur accidentally. It is set in operation. It is planned and deliberately and calculatedly executed, though its execution may appear to be the work of a spontaneous and creative artist.

Earlier I alluded to school board and administrative policies concerning foreign language instruction as having been heavily influenced by Dr. James B. Conant. Naturally, one man alone can not exert such dramatic influence. He must have expressed a widely held conviction, and one for which the climate of opinion was ready. The past achievement of foreign language teaching was judged ineffective, let us please remember, not because students were going on to fail in college, but because too few students were studying too few languages too short a time to achieve anything like mastery.

Tucson Public Schools Board of Education and administration has encouraged and promoted the teaching of Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Latin, Russian, and Spanish. It has encouraged and promoted long sequences, as long as can be reasonably provided under existing circumstances--six years in Spanish, four years in the other languages. There is always the hope, of course, that enrollment and retention in each of these languages will grow and increase, after a few years of trial, to justify the program from every standpoint. Guidelines and expectations on class size, etc., have been overlooked to a degree because there is an element of experimentation in what has been going on.

We have probably reached a point, however, when a closer accounting will have to be made. To raise teachers' salaries, as they should be raised, with no new sources of revenue in the offing, programs and services will have to be restricted, or more efficient and economical procedures will have to be discovered to retain those programs and services. Nobody wishes to restrict opportunities for students to enjoy enriched programs and long sequences of study. Therefore, efforts will undoubtedly be made to think out more efficient procedures.

For some time it has been apparent that certain very valuable courses can be offered

in one of our high schools, but not in another, because students do not enroll in sufficient numbers to keep the course going year after year. We assume that there is a complex of factors at work that creates this situation: socio-economic background of students, home attitudes, student-faculty relationships, teacher-teacher relationships, etc., etc., all suggest themselves as possibly pertinent, but this is of no consequence in our discussion here. Suffice it to say, that once this situation is recognized, there tends to be great reluctance to risk adding the course, or a similar course, to an environment in which prior experience says it probably will not succeed. I do not wish to imply that this thinking is conducted formally, behind closed doors, or otherwise, but it does definitely take shape. One result is a policy which states that a student may take a course offered anywhere in the district, so long as it is not offered in his own high school, and provided he takes the rest of his program in his home high school.

This is only one of a number of more efficient procedures which suggest themselves. Independent or semi-independent study is another. Team-teaching is still another. We hope that teachers of Russian will add their thoughts to the solution of this problem, because the continued possibility of relevance of Russian instruction as we have known it may well be at stake.

If you have not done so, I suggest you read "The Future of Education, The Class of 1989", by Marshall McLuhan and George B. Leonard in the February 21st issue of LOOK magazine. I will quote just one passage: "The very technology that now cries out for a new mode of education creates means for getting it. But new educational devices, though important, are not as central to tomorrow's schooling as are new roles for student and teacher. Citizens of the future will find much less need for sameness of function or vision. To the contrary, they will be rewarded for diversity and originality. Therefore, any real or imagined need for standardized classroom presentation may rapidly fade; the very first casualty of the present-day school system may well be the whole business of teacher-led instruction as we now know it."

In conclusion, therefore, I would like to summarize my thinking on this subject. Russian language instruction is something that American public opinion has wanted, and something which it has, in general, widely supported. My information is that Tucson has had one of the most flourishing secondary Russian programs in the country. There is reason for alarm, however. After very rapidly rising from nowhere to 21,500 secondary students throughout the nation in 1963, enrollment in Russian slipped by over 1,000 students in 1964.

It is my conviction that high school Russian can succeed only with difficulty and only with the tireless effort of the instructor to make Russian relevant to contemporary American teenage society. It cannot succeed, in my opinion, if it ignores reality--the fact that very few students are capable of learning a language by analysis and by massive vocabulary learning. The successful high school Russian program, therefore, cannot be excessively concerned with articulation between itself and a traditional college Russian program. In a highly competitive secondary foreign language market, a Russian program limited to the intellectual elite can simply not attract and hold enrollment justifying its continued existence. I assume it is understood that some other language programs may do so with impunity.

Finally, and most emphatically, the Russian teaching profession must, in my view, concern itself with the discovery of efficient and economical procedures for continuing Russian programs in the face of small enrollment. This <u>can</u> be done, but only if we all act professionally and cooperate closely and carefully.